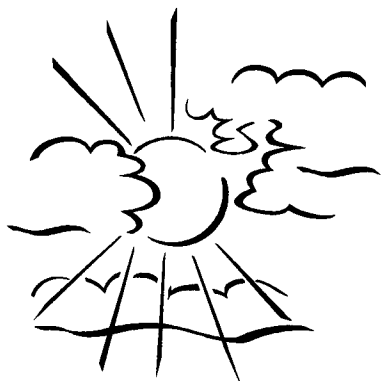


***Department
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Articles in Today's Clips

Thursday, June 1, 2006

(Be sure to maximize your screen to read your clips)

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Amber Alert Issued For 3-Year-Old Girl

Child Last Seen With Non-Custodial Father

POSTED: 7:20 am EDT June 1, 2006

An Amber Alert has been issued for a missing 3-year-old girl from Montcalm County. Serenna Ann Simons was last seen at about 11 a.m. Wednesday in Howard City, according to police. She was last seen with her non-custodial father, John Simons, 35, according to Michigan State Police in Rockford.

Serenna is described as white and was wearing a white pajama top and bottoms with Tweety Bird on them, police said. John Simons was described as white, 5 feet 7 inches tall, 190 pounds and wearing a brown, black and red T-shirt and yellow University of Michigan nylon pants, according to police. He also has an eagle tattoo on his lower back. Simons' vehicle was described as a 2003 white Oldsmobile Alero with the Michigan license plate YGS446.

Anyone with information should contact Michigan State Police in Rockford at (616) 866-4411 or call 911.

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News

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Posted: 5-31-2006

Police investigate death of 3-week-old girl

BALDWIN — The Lake County Sheriff's Office Wednesday investigated the death of a 3-week-old Grand Rapids girl who died during the night while staying at her father's home in Lake County's Pleasant Plains Township.

Lake County Undersheriff Mike Dermeyer said his department received a report about the death at 7:08 a.m. Wednesday. Dermeyer also said pathologist Dr. David Start, of Spectrum East-Blodgett Campus, ruled the baby's death was accidental suffocation while she slept.

Leaving Kids In Car Would Be Misdemeanor

MIRS, Wednesday, May 31, 2006

Parents who leave their young children in the car would face a 93-day, \$500 misdemeanor if authorities believe the child was at risk of being harmed by staying in the car under a pair of bills that cleared a House committee today.

The bills, HB 5914 and HB 5915, come after frustrated law enforcement officers and prosecutors complained to lawmakers that they've been unable to do anything to guardians who leave their kids in a car when, absent their intervention, the child could have suffered grave injuries.

Oakland County Undersheriff Michael **McCABE** and Eaton County Prosecutor Jeff **SAUTER** testified in front of the House Judiciary Committee today to separate incidents in their respective jurisdiction that highlighted the need for a new law.

In Orion Township last February, a mother went into a bar with her boyfriend and left her baby in the backseat. Authorities estimate the child was in the car for more than a half hour while the weather outside was an estimated 40 degrees. Since the child wasn't harmed, there was nothing the authorities could do about the situation outside of charging the woman for possessing a bag of pot the cops found on her front seat.

Sauter talked about a case in July where a mother and her sister left a four-month old inside a car parked outside the Charlotte Meijer. By the time the mother was located in the store and brought back to the parking lot, the child would have been in the car for 22 minutes had the baby not been extracted earlier. At 30 minutes, the doctors at the hospital estimate the child could have been harmed.

Rep. Steve **BIEDA** (D-Warren) then shared his own story. In his younger years, he worked at a store. One day, a panicked woman came inside to report that a 2 year old was locked inside of a car during a noticeably hot day. Bieda said he ended up breaking a window of the car to get the child out.

"It makes you wonder how you could be so stupid as to leave a child locked in a car," Bieda said, adding that he believes the committee should look at the broader issues of informing people through a public information campaign or signs in parking lots about the dangers of leaving children in automobiles.

HB 5914 and 5915, sponsored by Rep. Fran **AMOS** (R-Waterford) and Rep. David **LAW** (R-Commerce Twp.) moved through the committee today unanimously. According to the non-profit organization "Kids In Cars," 153 incidents involving 183 children in cars have been recorded this year. Of those, there were 22 fatalities.

Several other states, including California, Texas, Florida, Illinois and Massachusetts have this type of law on the books.

Under the proposed legislation, if the child is hurt from being left in the car, it's a one-year, \$1,000 misdemeanor. If the child is seriously hurt, it's a 10-year, \$5,000 felony. If the child dies, it's a 15-year, \$10,000 penalty.

Rule reversal not possible

Thursday, June 01, 2006

By John Tunison
The Grand Rapids Press

HOLLAND -- A Holland judge chastised the Ottawa County Jail for mistakenly allowing a couple's transfer to Texas last week without a court hearing but ruled Wednesday he cannot order them back.

Attorneys for Esther and Cipriano Gonzales IV, accused in the death of their 2-month-old daughter while in San Marcos, Texas, in March, say they may fight the controversial case in Texas.

"That may be the option we choose," said attorney Brad Johnson, who believes evidence against the couple may not pass muster in a probable cause hearing.

A probable cause hearing is used to determine if enough evidence exists to order a trial.

As relatives of the Gonzales' watched in court Wednesday, Holland District Court Judge Brad Knoll determined the couple's May 23 release to a prisoner transport company was an "irreversible mistake."

"Obviously, they should not have been sent back to Texas," Knoll said, later suggesting the sheriff's department and jail should admit responsibility.

Wednesday's court date was scheduled in April as the extradition hearing for the couple.

Relatives said they talked to Esther and Cipriano Gonzales since their arrival Monday at the Hays County, Texas, jail and learned they told Ottawa County jail officers of Wednesday's hearing as they were being shackled for transport at 4:30 a.m. Both asked to speak with their attorneys, family members said, but were told they could not.

Holland attorney John Moritz, representing Esther Gonzales, called the transfer a "clear violation of both the Gonzales' constitutional rights."

But Knoll, clearly annoyed, ruled he had no authority to order Texas authorities to return the couple for an extradition hearing.

"I could issue an order, but it simply would not be an enforceable order," he said.

Ottawa County Undersheriff Greg Steigenga admitted Wednesday jail officers erred in releasing the couple without checking on their court status. He maintained jail officials did not know of Wednesday's hearing but acknowledged "we should have been aware of it."

Meanwhile, relatives of the Gonzalezes say they are confident the couple will be released. They have a 3-year-old daughter being cared for by Mary Loreda, Esther Gonzales' mother.

"Her little girl needs her," Loreda said.

Send e-mail to the author: jtunison@grpress.com

Published June 1, 2006

Bill offers early out for state workers

Local rep wants to make room for younger staffers

By Chris Andrews
Lansing State Journal

State-government workers would have the chance to retire earlier and with sweetened benefits, under legislation introduced in the House on Wednesday.

State Rep. Rick Jones, R-Grand Ledge, hopes to give veteran employees who want to retire incentives to do so and provide employment opportunities for younger workers.

And he said he believes it would save the state about \$100 million. However, no studies have been conducted as of yet.

"We could allow employees to leave that are probably at the end of their working years and don't wish to be here," he said.

"We can be replacing them with people that need jobs and are paid at a beginning salary and a 401(k) instead of a retirement system."

Jones said he hopes his bill will be taken up in the fall.

Heidi Watson, a spokeswoman for Gov. Jennifer Granholm, said the governor is not contemplating another round of early retirements.

She said the state still is feeling the effects of a 2002 offering, when 8,000 workers retired.

Most state workers are eligible for retirement if they are at least 55 years old and have 30 years of service or are 60 with 10 years of state employment.

Under Jones' bill, workers whose age and years of service add up to at least 80 could retire.

And the factor used to calculate pensions would increase from 1.5

percent to 1.75 percent, boosting benefits by 16.7 percent.

Workers eager for plan

Jones said he has been besieged by state workers eager to take advantage of the program as word spread that he was working on a proposal.

George Chipman, 52, has worked in state government for 28 years. He said he'd jump at an early retirement program.

"After a while, there's a point where you'd just like to try something different and move on," said Chipman, who works in the Department of Labor and Economic Growth.

"It opens up spots for young folks coming out of college to get a professional-level job for the state of Michigan."

Union checking proposal

Alan Kilar, financial secretary treasurer of United Auto Workers Local 6000, said many workers want to retire in large part because of excessive work demands.

"They're looking for an early retirement just to get out from under this stress," he said.

But Kilar said the union wants to make sure the state can afford it. He said there will be additional costs to the pension system.

And he said it is important that all of the workers who are retired are replaced.

Jones said he agrees with the need to replace all the workers.

He said his plan would allow workers to retire over a three-year period to avoid a sudden loss of experience and knowledge.

Contact Chris Andrews at 377-1054 or candrews@lsj.com.

HOW PLAN WORKS

Here's how state Rep. Rick Jones' early retirement plan for Michigan government workers would work:

- Workers would be eligible to retire if their age and years of service add up to at least 80.

- Pensions would be based on their salary, years of service and a factor of 1.75 percent, up from the normal factor of 1.5 percent.
- The early retirement period would begin Jan. 1, 2007

Lawmaker wants to offer state employees early retirement

5/31/2006, 9:08 p.m. ET

By TIM MARTIN

The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — A Michigan lawmaker wants to offer state employees an early retirement plan.

State Rep. Rick Jones, R-Grand Ledge, introduced a bill Wednesday that would establish the program for state civil service employees. Jones said the deal would eventually save the state money by replacing high-seniority workers with low-seniority employees who would have lower salaries and also would have a less-expensive retirement plan.

"It would be a win-win for the state," said Jones, adding the amount of savings would not be known until the House Fiscal Agency completes a bill analysis.

Jones said his goal is not necessarily to reduce the size of the state government work force, which has more than 53,500 employees.

Jones said his office has taken several calls from state employees who have heard rumors about a possible "early out" deal and are interested in taking it. Some of those workers are "burned out and don't want to be here anymore," Jones said.

At the same, Jones said, many other people would be interested in working for the state if jobs were available.

Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm is not contemplating an early retirement deal for state government, spokeswoman Heidi Watson said.

Watson said state government is still feeling the effects of a 2002 buyout in which about 8,000 employees left. Critics said that led to the loss of expertise in key state service areas.

While there are exceptions, in general, a state employee with a combined age and length of service of at least 80 years would be eligible for early retirement under Jones' plan.

If the legislation is approved, the early retirements would be staggered over a few years to make the transition easier for state government.

Employees taking the early retirement deal would receive a payment 1.75 times their average annual salary.

The early retirement bill is House Bill 6117.

On the Net:

Michigan Legislature: <http://www.legislature.mi.gov>

Published June 1, 2006

Body of 35-year-old found in Haslett in '04

By Kevin Grasha
Lansing State Journal

As evidence against him was described at a sentencing hearing Wednesday, convicted murderer Paul David Gibbs lashed out, cursing at the judge before several officers dragged him from the courtroom.

"There was no overwhelming evidence," Gibbs shouted.

In April, a jury convicted the 50-year-old Jackson man of the 2004 murder of 35-year-old Tammie Sue Dubay of East Lansing, a paraplegic who was Gibbs' estranged girlfriend.

On Thursday, when Gibbs returned to the courtroom with shackled hands and feet and two officers at his side, Ingham County Circuit Judge Beverley Nettles-Nickerson did not hesitate imposing the mandatory punishment.

"This court has the pleasure to sentence you to life in prison," she said as Gibbs stared at her – now showing no emotion.

Gibbs, already serving time in state prison on an unrelated charge, will not have the opportunity for parole Nettles-Nickerson added.

Dubay's blanket-covered body was discovered along a rural Haslett road in July 2004, an electrical cord wrapped around her neck.

More than a dozen of her relatives and friends attended Wednesday's sentencing. Many wore buttons bearing Dubay's photograph, taken the year she graduated from Everett High School.

Before his outburst in court, Gibbs maintained his innocence and said police never investigated the possibility others were involved.

"I feel sorry for (Tammie's) family," he said. "But the bottom line is, I didn't commit this crime."

Gibbs' attorney, Lee Taylor, told the judge that he would appeal the verdict.

Dubay's mother, Margaret, read from a typed letter, at one point calling Gibbs a "predator" who hit and terrorized her daughter.

She said Tammie tried to fight back; she asked Gibbs why he didn't just walk away.

"You have shown no remorse for what you have done to my daughter," Margaret Dubay said.

Heather Morris, 30, who grew up with Tammie in Holt, said it is difficult knowing her friend is no longer alive.

"She was such a good soul. She had unconditional love for everyone," Morris said.

Morris said Dubay called about a week before she disappeared, but she wasn't able to return the call.

"The next thing I know, she's missing."

After the hearing, Dubay's older sister, Chris Benner, said: "For him to do something to someone who is defenseless ... it's cruel."

Contact Kevin Grasha at 267-1347 or kgrasha@lsj.com.

Employee charged

Grand Rapids Press

Thursday, June 01, 2006

LOWELL -- A Hope Network employee was arraigned Wednesday, accused of sexually assaulting a mentally impaired client of the organization's Lowell facility, police said. A preliminary hearing is scheduled for June 14 for Sarah Marie Cooper, 23, of Lowell, who is alleged to have assaulted the client, a 28-year-old male, at her Lowell apartment in July 2005. Cooper is charged with fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct, a two-year misdemeanor. Lowell police Detective Steven Bukala said the department was made aware of the alleged incident by Hope Network officials after the client told someone at the facility. "They took action immediately," said Bukala, who added the victim is aware of what has happened. Hope Network officials could not be reached for comment.

Day-care provider to lose license

FROM TRAVERSE CITY RECORD EAGLE STAFF REPORTS

May 31, 2006

WILLIAMSBURG — The state took action to revoke a Williamsburg day-care provider's license.

The Michigan Department of Human Services issued an order to revoke the license of day-care provider Christie Patzer, 31, of Williamsburg. A state-issued press release indicated the action against Patzer was taken because of a recent complaint investigation. The investigation allegedly found violations of the Child Care Organizations Act and "administrative rules regarding discipline, caregiver responsibilities and supervision."

A spokeswoman for the Department of Human Services refused to further explain the nature of the violations. Patzer could not be reached for comment.

The action means Patzer may not operate a day-care home and may not care for children. Patzer was registered to operate a day care for six children since February 2004. In July 2004, the state Office of Children and Adult Licensing reported on an inspection of the day care home and found no rule violations.

Thursday, June 01, 2006

Detroit News Editorial

Mackinac Conference

Unskilled labor fuels Michigan's economy

Survey finds most jobs are created for low-skill workers

Further evidence of the sorry state of Michigan's economy comes today from the latest Your Child-Detroit News survey: The workers most in demand in the state are those with the least skills.

They are also the workers who make the least money and are the most likely to lose their jobs when business conditions worsen.

The state seems to have sunk to the level of its educational preparedness. Michigan lags the nation in the percentage of its citizens who go to college or seek other training after high school. The state's residents put a low value on education, and the business community is a full partner in that neglect.

The Your Child-Detroit News survey, prepared by the Lansing-based EPIC-MRA polling firm, is to be released today at the Detroit Regional Chamber's annual conference on Mackinac Island. A year ago, the poll revealed the startling statistic that only 27 percent of Michigan parents view a college education as essential to the future success and happiness of their children.

That started a statewide conversation on improving the culture of education. Much of the talk centered on how the state's underperforming education system is cheating businesses of the highly skilled and educated workers they desire.

Now we learn that assumption wasn't quite right. The new survey finds that while a majority of business executives say students should get an education beyond high school, 52 percent say the new hires they will add during the next year will need only a high school diploma to get in the door.

Those who eschew post-high school training should not read that statistic as assurance that the unskilled can get a good job without an education. The survey also found the jobs Michigan businesses are creating for high school graduates pay less than the national average and are less secure.

That helps explain why the state's household income growth lags nearly every other state.

The Your Child-Detroit News survey is solid evidence that Michigan's economy is not creating the types of jobs that will return the state to the prosperity it once enjoyed.

The best jobs of today -- and the future -- require skills and education. A college graduate will earn \$1 million more than those with only a high school diploma over the course of a lifetime.

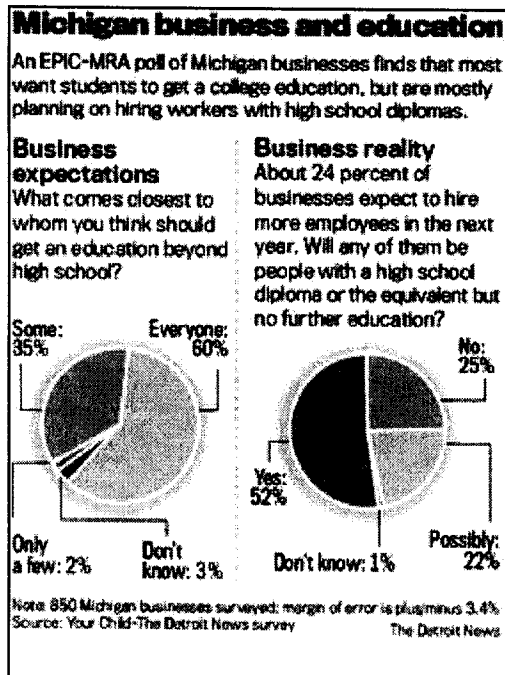
Michigan is producing too few jobs for college graduates, helping explain why so many of its best and brightest young people are leaving the state for places with greater opportunities.

Business must do more to improve education. But barely half partner with the schools in their local communities, the survey found, and only half spend money on employee training.

Michigan seems to have resigned itself to becoming a low-skill, low-pay state.

Changing that fate starts with education. If Michigan commits to producing a highly educated, highly skilled work force, the employers looking for those workers will come here.

So far, Michigan seems to be a haven for employers looking for less desirable workers.



New Michigan Works head

The Grand Rapids Press

Thursday, June 01, 2006

OTTAWA COUNTY -- County officials have named Bill Raymond director of its Michigan Works program and Community Action Agency. Raymond, who once served as executive director of Good Samaritan Ministries in Holland, is currently the chief operating officer of IN Network of Zeeland. He replaces Cathy Simons, who retired in March after 17 years with Michigan Works and CAA. Raymond was chosen from 45 candidates. He will receive a salary of \$61,538, and begin duties June 26.

Published June 1, 2006

[From the Lansing State Journal]

Judge denies bid to dismiss case

Associated Press

BEULAH - Rejecting defense arguments that the case against Mark Unger is "flimsy" and based on Rank speculation," a judge ruled Wednesday that the suburban Detroit man's trial on charges of murdering his wife should continue.

Attorney Robert Harrison asked that the case be dismissed before he was to begin calling defense witnesses in the trial of Unger, 45, of Huntington Woods. Unger is charged with first-degree murder in the death of his wife Florence, whose body was found Oct. 25, 2003, in Lower Herring Lake at the Watervale resort in northwest Michigan.

Prosecutors contend Florence Unger, 37, was pushed or fell over a boathouse railing to a concrete pad 12 feet below, then was dragged, alive but unconscious, into the lake's shallow edge, where she drowned.

Mark Unger is accused of killing his wife during an argument over a pending divorce. He has pleaded not guilty and says his wife's death was accidental.

Benzie County Circuit Judge James Batzer said that, although the case against Unger is circumstantial, the prosecution has presented sufficient evidence for the jury to consider along with defense arguments, The Detroit News reported Wednesday.

Focus of Unger trial turns to condition of deck, railing

June 1, 2006

BY FRANK WITSIL
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

BEULAH -- The railing around the deck where Florence Unger was last seen alive and the posts holding up the railing were so rotted or poorly constructed, it would not have kept anyone from falling over it, an engineer testified Wednesday.

Jurors saw a partial replica of the wooden deck that the 37-year-old Unger apparently tumbled from and died in 2003.

In the fifth week of testimony, the defense attempted to show how Unger could have fallen from the deck without having been pushed.

Attorneys questioned the condition of the railing and posts.

"Would it prevent someone from falling over?" defense attorney Thomas McGuire asked.

"In my opinion, no," said John Zarzecki, a consultant for Plymouth-based Soil and Materials Engineers Inc.

Unger's husband, Mark Unger, 45, of Huntington Woods is on trial in Benzie County Circuit Court, charged with killing her.

The couple and their two sons were on a weekend getaway at Watervale, a northern Michigan resort, at the time of her death.

State prosecutors say Mark Unger forced his wife, who was 5-foot-6, over the edge of a 12-foot-high deck, that she hit her head on a concrete slab below, then -- to cover up what he had done -- he put her body in the nearby water and drowned her.

Mark Unger has said he had nothing to do with her death and that it was an accident.

So far, nearly 250 exhibits have been presented in the trial.

The deck replica was significant because even though jurors went to Watervale to see the location where Florence Unger's body was found floating in Lower Herring Lake, not far from the deck, they were not able to see what the deck looked like at the time of her death.

The deck railing has since been brought up to code, and what jurors saw at the scene was quite different from what was there the night Florence Unger went over it.

Zarzecki, who has a degree in chemical engineering and is a certified engineering technologist, testified that he examined the deck twice after Florence Unger's death.

He said he took measurements of the deck and the railing, which was 26 1/2 inches to 27 inches high. -- barely higher than McGuire's knees as he stood on the replica.

Zarzecki said Michigan code calls for handrails to be 36 inches high.

Benzie County sheriff's detectives and Michigan State Police investigators said the deck was not slippery.

But Zarzecki said he found the deck to be slick and moss-covered, and the posts holding up the handrails to be rotted and flexible.

In cross-examination, special Assistant Attorney General Mark Bilkovic showed Zarzecki photos of the deck and asked him about his reports and notes.

Zarzecki acknowledged that he made no mention in his report of moss or algae or that the deck was slippery.

Contact FRANK WITSIL at 248-351-3690 or fwitsil@freepress.com.

Thursday, June 01, 2006

Unger defense experts cite unstable deck railing

Mike Martindale / The Detroit News

BEULAH -- A construction materials expert testified Wednesday that a wooden railing around a boathouse deck where a Huntington Woods woman died in October 2003 was rotting, violated state building code and would not have supported the weight of anyone leaning against it.

Those revelations came as defense attorneys began to present their side in the Mark Unger murder trial by calling experts to discuss how Florence Unger might have died by accident, rather than at her husband's hands.

Mark Unger, 45, is on trial in Benzie Circuit Court for first-degree murder in the death of his wife, Florence, 37, who was found floating face-down in Lower Herring Lake, about 10 miles south of Frankfort.

Investigators believe the Ungers argued about a pending divorce on a boathouse deck and she was either pushed, kicked or fell 12 feet to a concrete surface, suffering a fractured skull and hip.

Investigators believe Unger then dragged her, unconscious, into the lake, where she drowned.

But Unger's defense attorneys contend the woman fell entirely on her own, possibly after slipping or falling against a rotting 26 -inch-high wooden railing while Unger was asleep in a nearby cottage with their two sons.

John Zarzecki, a construction materials specialist from Plymouth, told the Benzie Circuit Court jury the railing he examined six months later was too short to meet code and wasn't sound.

"The Michigan building code for the last 20 years has required a 36-inch height (for a deck railing)," testified Zarzecki, who was asked if the smaller structure would have prevented someone from falling off.

"In my opinion, no," said Zarzecki.

"And this would have occurred along any place along that railing. It was completely rotted."

Zarzecki, a wood specialist for at least 30 years, was the first defense witness called by attorney Thomas McGuire.

He tests wood products for durability, integrity and safety issues and was asked to evaluate the wood decking that was in place at the Inn of Watervale resort in February 2004.

"We traveled to (Lower Herring Lake) in February 2004 and took some photographs and measurements and in April went back when a company was removing portions of the deck," said Zarzecki.

Zarzecki said a wood railing was removed by the other company at the lakeside end of the boathouse deck.

An existing wood railing could be moved 5 or 6 inches by hand, Zarzecki said, and if more force was used "might have broken off entirely."

Zarzecki said the lower section of a decayed railing "was rotting away, had stress fractures or was broken."

A 10-by-3-foot reproduction of the railing -- along with what its proper height should have been -- was wheeled into the courtroom Wednesday by McGuire and his associates. The structure is composed of 2-by-4 vertical posts and a top rail and three 1-by-6 horizontal railings, said Zarzecki, noting the wood on the original structure "was shrinking" and in some places supported by wood shims. Some portions were not even nailed, he said, while others had nails that were loose or didn't match up with holes in the wood.

After several days of scientific testimony from forensic experts and evidence technicians, jurors leaned forward with interest as the large wooden exhibit was brought before them. Many jurors could be seen jotting down notes or making their own sketches of the creation as it was explained by Zarzecki.

During the prosecution's presentation earlier in the trial, Watervale owner Linn Duncan testified he leaned up against the railing and lowered over 20 pieces of wooden furniture down to the boathouse the day before Florence Unger's body was found in the lake. He assessed the railing as strong and sturdy at that time.

A load-cell test by Michigan State Police later determined the railing withstood a 198-pound weight.

Under cross-examination, attorney Mark Bilkovic noted how Zarzecki's written report found no decay or deterioration on several portions of the railing, contrary to his testimony that it was rotted.

"I can't say they would fall over but potentially could fall over -- if enough force was put against it," said Zarzecki.

Bilkovic asked Zarzecki if he had any information that anyone had ever gone through any portion of the railing, dating back to 2002.

"No, but pieces had been replaced," said Zarzecki.

You can reach Mike Martindale at (248) 647-7226 or e-mail at [*mmartindale@detnews.com*](mailto:mmartindale@detnews.com).



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
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MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING



MARIANNE UDOW
DIRECTOR

News Release

Contact: Stepheni Schlinker or Maureen Sorbet (517) 373-7394

Michigan Heart Gallery on Display in Petoskey ***Public to view professional portraits of Michigan foster children*** ***who are waiting for adoption***

June 1, 2006

PETOSKEY – There are more than 4,000 children in Michigan with parental rights terminated who are either waiting for their adoption to be finalized or waiting for a family. Most of these children are among those hardest to place – kids who are older and members of minorities and/or sibling groups. Adoption for older youth in the foster care system is a priority to ensure they do not leave the foster care system without a connection to a supportive adult.

Sixty of these children are featured in a heart-warming photographic exhibit called The Michigan Heart Gallery. The Michigan Heart Gallery will be on display from June 1 – 23, 2006 at the Petoskey Public Library, 500 E. Mitchell, in Petoskey. There will be a general adoption information meeting at the library on Thursday, June 15 from 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. Guest presenter will be Mary Wood, president of the Michigan Adoptive Foster and Kinship organization.

The Michigan Heart Gallery, a collaborative effort between the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange, the Adoptive Family Support Network and the Michigan Department of Human Services, seeks to bring our community closer to the faces and voices of children waiting for a “forever family.” The Michigan Heart Gallery features portraits of Michigan’s waiting children who come from various regions of the state and are representative of different races and ages.

“The Michigan Heart Gallery has been an amazing undertaking,” Kristen Donnay, intake coordinator for the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange, said. “The portraits of the children are compelling. They draw you in and make you feel like you know the child. Equally as impressive has been the time, energy and compassion that the photographers have brought to the project.”

Recruitment activities such as the Heart Gallery remind people that there are many children in Michigan who are waiting to be adopted.

“Most of the children featured have been waiting for a long time to find a family to call their own,” Marianne Udow, director of the Michigan Department of Human Services, said. “While we hope the children featured in The Heart Gallery will find families, the larger goal of The Heart Gallery is to promote the idea of caring for and adopting children from the foster care system. We know from experience that if these children are not seen, and if we do not continue to educate the public about older children who need families, then they are forgotten. We are thrilled that the public will have a chance to view these portraits, get to know the children and possibly take action to see if adoption may be right for them.”

-MORE-

The photographs in The Heart Gallery were taken by more than 50 professional photographers who donated their time, talent and resources to take portraits that help capture the spirit of children in the foster care system. The Heart Gallery allows these children to be seen in an artistic, poignant and tasteful photographic exhibit. The kids thoroughly enjoyed their photo shoot experience. Some children were able to help select which portrait to feature in The Heart Gallery, while others came up with their own poses and some were given lessons in photography during the photo shoot, allowing them to become budding photographers themselves. Professional photographer Andre LaRoche volunteered to participate in The Michigan Heart Gallery and photographed 11-year-old Anthony.

"After meeting Anthony and walking around the youth home looking for a location to photograph him, I had to wipe tears from my eyes," LaRoche said. "My son is four years old and I give him and he gives me so much love. Without him, my life would be empty. I cannot easily think of all the boys at this center, with no loving parents, without a home, with their hopes and dreams possibly out of their reach."

For more than two years Anthony has been in the foster care system, waiting for his forever family. Recently, he was matched with a family after his Heart Gallery photograph caught their eye on the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange Web site.

Another piece of The Michigan Heart Gallery is a small sampling of portraits of successful adoptive families. The Heart Gallery will feature up to 10 families who have opened their hearts and homes to children from the foster care system.

"These wonderful families show others that it is possible to build a family through special needs adoption," Udow said. "Despite the rough times that they might have faced along the way, they prove how much love and care can do for these children."

The Heart Gallery concept was initially founded by the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department in 2001 as a way to help foster children in protective custody who are waiting for adoptive families find the families they desire. Stirring photographs, which reveal the children's spirits and individuality, have helped many of them find loving homes. The Heart Gallery has expanded to dozens of states and cities since 2001. Heart Galleries all over the United States have been featured in *People* magazine, the *New York Times* and on CNN, MSNBC and the Today Show.

For more information about The Michigan Heart Gallery and how you can get involved, please call (800) 589-6273 or visit The Michigan Heart Gallery Web site at www.miheart.org

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